

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE **A2**NEW YORK TIMES  
11 November 1985

# Amid Pacific Coral Reefs, Assassination Mystery

By CLYDE HABERMAN

Special to The New York Times

KOROR, Palau — Shortly after midnight last June 30, President Haruo Remeliik was about to enter his house when someone stepped out of the shadows and killed him with four shots from a .32-caliber pistol.

It was hard to tell what startled Palauans more, that their first elected President had been assassinated or that a gun had been the weapon in an obviously premeditated killing.

Violence is not unheard of in this attractive necklace of Micronesian islands. But it tends to come in sudden bursts of passion, and weapons of choice are usually fishing spears, knives or large rocks.

The President's death, of itself, produced surprisingly few ripples among Palau's 14,000 people.

## A Lack of Evidence

Four men, including the son and nephew of Mr. Remeliik's main political rival, were arrested and accused of plotting the killing. But the charges were then dropped for lack of evidence, even though investigators hint that they may be reinstated. Officials imposed a 9 P.M. curfew, but ended it soon.

Before long Mr. Remeliik's name disappeared from daily conversation.

In late August a special election was held and a new President, Lazarus Salii, was chosen. After Mr. Salii's recent inauguration, islanders settled back to ponder other matters.

"Life goes on," said Santos Olikong, Speaker of Palau's House of Delegates.

But the Remeliik killing may have destroyed the pacifist image nurtured by tiny Palau, whose coral reefs and magnificent vistas invite trouble-in-paradise headlines whenever something goes wrong.

## Turbulence Is No Stranger

Actually, many Palauans never thought of their islands as notably pacifist. Koror has been unsettled by episodic labor unrest that led in 1981 to the burning of the President's office and, the following year, to the fatal shooting of a striker by a police officer.

The peace-loving reputation rests largely on a five-year-old Constitution that prohibits nuclear weapons from being used, tested, stored or dumped here. At his death, however, Mr. Remeliik was working with United States officials on a deal to circumvent the Constitution and thereby hasten an end to an American trusteeship that has existed since 1947.

Like other Micronesian states that form the United States trust territory, Palau, a self-pronounced republic since 1980, is looking for greater home rule under a Compact of Free Association that has been under negotiation for the last 16 years. Under this arrangement, Micronesian islanders would continue to receive several hundred million dollars in American aid, on which they have grown dependent. In return, the United States would retain permanent military sovereignty in a strategically sensitive region.

Critical, the Americans feel, is their right to deploy nuclear weapons as they see fit.

But Palau's Constitution stands in the way, and even though voters here twice approved the compact by large margins, they fell short of the 75 percent majority needed to waive the anti-nuclear clause.

Some Palauans suspect that the United States views these islands as a fallback should it lose the Subic Naval Station and Clark Air Base in the nearby Philippines. American officials deny this. But they also acknowledge that they cannot abide by Palau's anti-nuclear requirements. And so — first with President Remeliik, now with President Salii — they have worked out an agreement that sidesteps the Constitution.

It permits the United States to operate "nuclear-capable vessels and aircraft" in Palau "without confirming or denying the presence of such weapons." Whether the deal can win popular approval remains a question, but the 48-year-old Mr. Salii argues that Palau has little choice.

Along this line, he articulates the ambivalence that islanders across the Micronesian chain feel toward their American patrons.

## Are Trawlers Just for Fishing?

On the one hand, he says that United States officials probably overstate their defense needs. On the other, he worries about a possible Soviet presence in the region.

The concern grew recently when Kiribati, the former Gilbert Islands, gave Russian trawlers the right to fish in its waters. American intelligence agencies believe that these ships are used in surveillance operations.

For Palau, Mr. Salii says, "super-power politics" is less important than the reality that his country could not function without continued American help. But just because he needs United States money does not mean he likes it.

Palauans often regard themselves as Micronesia's elite. Their islands tend to be more manicured than others. They have the only vocational college and the only museum.

But they suffer the same legacy endured by all Micronesians after 38 years of American rule — few economic opportunities and heavy dependence on government jobs. Improvements over the decades are scant.

## No Hope for Fair Treatment

"There should be no doubt that Palau is on the side of the U.S.," Mr. Salii said in an interview. But in almost the same breath, he added, "The Americans will never treat us fairly. They don't know how, and they don't care."

When it has looked elsewhere for a benefactor, however, Palau has run into trouble. It bought a 16-megawatt power station from a British company, International Power Systems, but has defaulted twice on \$34 million in construction loans.

United States officials, who dismissed the project as grandiose to start with, are not disposed to help. As a result, Mr. Salii says that debt refinancing must be one of his first priorities.

One responsibility he will leave to others, he says, is finding the killers of Mr. Remeliik, whose death has not prompted universal grief here.

## A Hero's Death

"He died a hero, and it shouldn't have been that way," complained Roman Tmetuchl, a leading businessman and Mr. Remeliik's chief political rival.

As Mr. Tmetuchl sees it, he was one of the bigger losers in the killing. It was his son and nephew who were arrested, along with two others. Although the charges were dropped, Mr. Tmetuchl said, probably "90 percent of Palau"

suspects him of masterminding the assassination.

Local investigators, bolstered by two on-loan F.B.I. agents, do not rule out the possibility that the charges will be renewed.

But Palau's Attorney General, Russell Weller Jr., says that motives remain elusive. That has fed all manner of speculation, the leading theories being that Mr. Remeliik died at the hands of political rivals, or a jealous

husband, or drug traffickers, or real-estate developers or the United States Central Intelligence Agency.

"We've got a good handle as to what happened, but not why it happened," Mr. Weller said. But he told the Palauan Congress, the Olbiil Era Kelulau, to expect arrests in the next two months.

"I don't think there are going to be any surprises," he said.